

## Annual Report 2015-16

### Executive Summary

- The group currently has three convenors including activist-researcher and mid-career academics.
- The forum has been growing with 206 Jiscmail members and 797 Facebook group followers as of 26 February 2017.
- The forum has organised three activist-academic events and one academic event during the academic year 2015/2016.
- The convenors of the forum are currently preparing an open event on a contemporary issue in the context of post-Brexit reality to be held in London and to be attended by activists, academics, students, emerging scholars, experts and practitioners.
- Visibility and public engagement activities have been strengthened through social media, e.g. Facebook.

### Introduction

The forum has three convenors, Rumana Hashem, Spyros Themelis and Tom Vickers, who co-worked throughout the academic year 2015/16, and remain committed to continue to work to expand on the forum's future activities and action.

The forum has a [new website](#), hosted by the British Sociological Association in October 2016. The BSA-ACTIVISM-IN-SOCIOLOGY-FORUM Jiscmail list continues to be used as a means of sharing information, calls for papers and calls to action, and publicising events. The list has 206 subscribers. The separate list, BSA-ASF-DISCUSS, which was created in summer 2015 in order to keep the main list clear for announcements, is still in place. However, most members prefer to use the main list of the forum for sharing information.

The forum's Facebook page has been used to distribute information and generate debate, with 797 followers as of 26/02/17. It is notable that ASF has more Facebook page followers than Jiscmail members. The reason for this may be related to the role of social media and the mission of the forum. As activists may be relatively uncomfortable in a formal and academic forum, most activist supporters of the forum prefer to follow us on Facebook.

### Activities undertaken in 2015/16 academic year

There were four events in total which the forum organised between October 2015 and August 2016, and have co-organised with activist organisations in Birmingham and Nottingham. Further details are below:

Academic-activist panel at BSA-Annual Conference 2016

An interactive and epistemologically rigorous panel focusing on Sociology's future and activism in a neo-liberal world, titled "Activist, Radical, Public: Sociology's Alternative Futures?" was being held on Thursday 7 April 2016 ( 13:30-1500 GMT) at the BSA Annual Conference 2016, *Fragmented Society, Connected Globe*, at Aston University in Birmingham. Co-organised by the ASF convenors (Rumana Hashem, Spyros Themelis and Tom Vickers), the panel was formed by four speakers including students and senior academics, namely Joyce Canaan, Stephen Cowden, Elio De Muccio and Spyros Themelis from a cross-disciplinary background of Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy – all of whom demonstrate an activist-academic background. The panel brought together academics, researchers and students who theorise about action and/or actively pursue changes in academia and society. The panellists have emphasised the need for an alternative sociological approach and invited participants to engage with activism in responding both to the economic and social crisis and the crisis of sociological actions for social change in neoliberal society.

The structure of the session was as follows: an introductory speech on the key themes (activist, radical, public) by the lead-author of the panel; presentation of accounts informed by action by activist-sociologists; discussion of the social and other benefits of activism; a discussion of the political limits of activism and localised interventions; and discussion of the role of sociology in fostering social change. Papers included from "glimpses of a different educational process", and "reflections from Brazilian militants" to "trade union activism and the necessity of sociological praxis" in the UK and elsewhere.

The aim of the panel was to create a forum for the discussion of the role of sociology in responding both to the economic and social crisis and the crisis of sociology itself. Followed by a fringe event, also organised by the Activism in Sociology Forum, the panel has explored the meaning and purpose of activism and the tensions between 'activist', 'radical' and 'public' understandings of sociology. Panel authors have asked whether an 'activist turn' in sociology could offer a progressive alternative future to the discipline. These concerns about the future of sociology are raised against the backdrop of the marketisation of education and attendant neoliberal narratives and policies that focus on individual choice and responsibility, which hamper sociology's attention to social structures and blunt its radical edge. On the whole, the panel sought to engage both with the responses to the purportedly necessary but socially and economically catastrophic austerity and reform agendas necessitated by neoliberal capitalism and also with the drawbacks and criticisms against activism-driven sociology.

The discussion was highly interactive and speakers have actively engaged with the audience, and the panel organisers simultaneously engaged with public on social media, e.g. twitter and Facebook. The discussion under the subtheme, Social Divisions / Social Identities, of Brtisoc16 conference was apparently one of the timely initiatives of ASF and it led to an [open event](#) with activists and students that was held by the forum in the evening on the same day at the conference at the Student bar of Aston University in Birmingham.

### Fringe event 2016

On the same day in the evening of Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2016, the ASF successfully held its second fringe event which engaged with local communities and activists which was attended by 36 participants including activists, academics and students belonging to 13 different local organisations who were involved in various projects and struggles. The event was held as part of the annual conference of British Sociological Association (BritSoc 2016) at Aston University in Birmingham. The [free-to-attend event](#), titled “Radical Education Inside and Outside Universities”, was co-hosted by [Birmingham Radical Education](#) and Birmingham Autonomous University, and was held at the B4 Bar at Aston University in Birmingham. A house full of participants in the meeting addressed the impossibility of intellectual – especially critical and political – work in universities worldwide, and British universities in particular.

The meeting with local activists and students was initiated from an understanding that it is seemingly impossible to be an intellectual worker in the neoliberal capitalist university and most other working spaces today. Many of us have experienced frustrations with the many moments of resistance in education. These range from the need to find credible and realistic strategies that allow us to resist the neoliberal university in here and now, but also the need to create a space to think and practice more freely how we may move beyond it. Furthermore, from the fact that we do not just want to restate our respective dissatisfactions to each other all the time emerges a need to work in alliances or in an orchestrated fashion. At the same time, this appears to be frustrated by a need to build capacities in our own separate ways – as well as recognising that genuine disagreements are necessary for strengthening social movements.

The meeting kicked off by two provocations by Professor Joyce Canaan and by Martin Bradbury from Birmingham Autonomous University, who presented on the impoverishment of the concept of poverty and the political implications of this for our struggles. One provocation by Joyce Canaan offered a glimpse to an alternative, and invited all to learn from the movement of landless workers in Brazil. She called for “Producing solidarity by acting in solidarity”, and has asked us to learn with Brazilian education and with other social movement activists thereby working collectively and using pedagogy as praxis for education and social change. This was followed by Martin recounted his time in the student movement, when through protests and occupations, networks of solidarity and mutual aid became a dialectic of theory and practice: developing new skills, points of leverage, and mutual recognition. He then showed how at the same time, in the process of making demands, anti-austerity struggles have posed too many limits on our imagination of what poverty is: faced with an economic argument rather than their needs, people are reduced to the logic of capital and prevented from going beyond limits through which they could see themselves as having an ability to develop oneself beyond capitalism. He speaks about how balancing the budget is like listening to U2 or Coldplay: always the same. Social movement activists are forced to use the language of the bourgeois establishment. Martin asks, is there more creativity and originality elsewhere in the world? For Martin, capitalism is poverty - the synthesised denial of our human potential.

These provocations led to a long discussion and debates among the participants who split into five small groups, facilitated by five co-organisers of the event, and have debated on the related issues. It

was agreed by the small groups that the 'model to alternative' presented by Canaan is a good model to follow because it advocates for a dialogical and collective struggle and for using pedagogy to overcome oppression, poverty and illiteracy. The groups agreed that we should think about how the landless people's praxis includes reflection on the process of continuing to overcome oppression, exclusion and the fatalism that those producing these factors seek to nurture and on the efficacy of their efforts to create solidarity. The group members have also reflected on the word "poverty" that Martin Bradbury has used in his provocation. Question was poverty of what - Apart from material poverty, is there a poverty in believing in alternatives?

It was a long evening of an, apparently, stimulating discussion where activists, academics, researchers, students and scholars have identified many similarities in their diverse experiences at higher educational institutions and have engaged with dissimilar ideas and thoughts of participants who come from different geographical, social and political backgrounds. The event was highly appreciated by the participants and the organisers of the meeting were left with a feeling that a continuation of this dialogue is of utmost importance.

The fringe event was well-publicised on social media, and through professional and personal networks of the convenors of ASF and their co-organisers. A full report of the event is available on BSA-ASF Study forum website [here](#).

#### Activist- Academic events at Nottingham Trent University

In addition the above events, two small meetings were organised by the forum and hosted at the Nottingham Trent University. These include two local meetings of the Activism in Sociology Forum in Nottingham: the first local meeting of the Forum was held on 4 February in 2016 at the bar of Broadway Cinema. The second one was held on 10 March in 2016, hosted at Lee Rosy's tea shop on Broad Street in Nottingham. Both of these events were aimed at creating spaces for local activists to engage in dialogue with ASF members in informal settings, which we saw as the beginning of an ongoing discussion and organising actions.

#### **Forthcoming events: in London**

At present ASF are in preparation of a public event as a continuation of the dialogue that has started at the fringe event on radical education outside universities. The event is to be held between May and June (date tbc) in London. The convenors are engaged in consultation with forum members in order to identify what would be an appropriate event for activist-sociologists in the post-Brexit Britain. At the same time, the convenors of the forum are currently in preparation of a publication on the theme of the fringe event and the conference panel that were held in 2016. Also the ASF is supporting a BSA-Early Career Forum event, with some bursaries for community activists to attend, to be held in June 2017.

### **Conclusion: Next Steps**

The convenors and many members of ASF acknowledge that the activities of ASF should be wide, and the forum needs to be pro-active in social actions for change in real world. There are members who have suggested that a good discussion would be what the 'activism' in activism in sociology means. It is envisaged that this forum doing activism, for example, being involved in more than just normal academic ways, and that has not happened.

A few members have also thought that it would be good to have a meeting not at an academic conference, because some people are alienated from such conferences, and this may help to make it less academic and more activist-sociological. However, these are just some suggestions which will be considered before the next event has been organised.

The forum is dedicated to expand on new and innovative activities with impact. We are currently open for a new convenor to join the existing convenors, and would like to invite a sociologist, preferably from post-graduate community, with an activist background to join the convenors to organise action-oriented events. The call for convenor is open.